



Home Office

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Pete Wishart, MP
Scottish Affairs Committee
Committee Office
House of Commons
London
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Dear Pete,

Thank you for your letter dated 25 April 2019 regarding the issues Pro-Force and Concordia have experienced with gaining visas as part of their recruitment under the seasonal agricultural workers pilot.

We recognise the importance of seasonal workers which is why we've introduced this new pilot to help alleviate seasonal labour shortages during peak production periods. The UK has one of the most attractive and competitive visa services in the world and we will always welcome those who want to do business and invest in the UK and provide support to those organisations who enable this. I am aware that my officials in UKVI had been engaged with both Pro-Force and Concordia directly to ensure that applications could be submitted early. This included providing increased appointment availability in the Visa Application Centres (VACs) in the relevant locations and also the offer of additional bespoke support through an on demand mobile visa service which both operators decided not to utilise.

I have noted the concerns in your letter, which I have addressed below;

You mentioned the delays experienced with the processing of visas and that some applications were taking over 30 days to complete. Performance figures show that 100% decisions have been made inside our global customer service standard of 15 days. Where a visa may be needed more urgently, customers in both locations have the option of applying for the Priority Visa Service.

It is regrettable though that for a small number of applications, we are aware that the public holidays for Easter in the UK and in Eastern Europe have resulted in a longer timespan before the passports with the visa vignettes endorsed within them were returned to the customer following the decision on the visa. UKVI are taking steps to process applications through this route at an earlier stage to prevent this happening again.

You mentioned the issues workers have had with the availability of appointments in the VACs in Ukraine and Moldova. UKVI outsource the running of these centres to our commercial partner TLS, who operate the VACs in both Kyiv, Ukraine and Chisinau, Moldova.

TLS's role is to capture visa applicants' biometrics and forward their visa application documentation to the Home Office Decision Making Centres (DMCs). They also offer an assisted scanning service for those customers who prefer not to self-upload their own supporting evidence. Once Home Office staff have decided an application, the decision is returned to the customer via TLS. Outsourcing this service is the most cost-effective way of running the network, representing the best value for money for the UK taxpayer.

As you mentioned, in response to the increased demand the VAC in Chisinau increased its opening times to two days a week. Appointments tables for Chisinau show sufficient capacity and unused slots in the last month. 50 appointments are available daily and not all of those slots are being taken. Our commercial partner monitors appointment capacity closely and will offer additional opening days as required.

You also raised a concern about the cost of appointments. It is only right that those who benefit from our immigration system pay towards its costs. This has been a long-standing position of successive Governments. These costs reduce the financial burden on the UK taxpayers and make sure that the border, immigration and citizenship system is funded by those who directly benefit from it.

The majority of VACs, including Kyiv are free to use. However, for some locations where visa demand is low, as in Moldova, or sometimes where there are multiple application centres in one country, UKVI charge an additional fee. This charge enables UKVI to extend the network of application centres to locations where it would otherwise not be viable.

The standard fee for an appointment is £55 which applies to all user pay VAC locations globally. In addition to the standard service our commercial partners offer a range of optional, added value services for an additional fee which provide additional convenience for the customer, for example a prime-time appointment. These can be purchased by customers and are intended to enhance the customer experience.

As referred to above, for the assisted scanning service, for those who choose not to use the self upload system, TLS charge 805 UAH in Kyiv and EUR 22.40 in Chisinau. We understand that Concordia and Pro-Force are scanning the supporting evidence, a single document, on behalf of customers so have not used this service.

Throughout the pilot, 623 applications have been received and all visas have been issued, except for one. One of the key measures of success for this pilot will of course be assessing whether it can be delivered whilst maintaining robust immigration control. It is therefore very much in the sector's best interests that full and thorough checks are made.

I hope this addresses your concerns adequately, and please do let me know if you have further questions.



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